Carpegna Falconieri: The Militant Middle Ages

Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages: Contemporary Politics between New Barbarians and Modern Crusaders*, trans. Andrew M. Hiltzik (Brill, 2020), 281pp.

Reviewed by Matthias D. Berger (matthias.berger@ens.unibe.ch)

The Middle Ages, Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri argues in his 2011 book newly translated into English, hold an ambiguous yet privileged position in our time: "There is, perhaps, no other historical epoch that provides our contemporary world with so much nourishment for our own imaginations" (1). Carpegna Falconieri's wide-ranging book proceeds from the observation that the medieval has the unique ability to cater to statements of identity at all levels of society, from the local to the national to the mega-identity of "Western culture" (6). The book focuses on the politics of these (in a wider sense) "identitarian Middle Ages" (74). Highlighting the strong connection between medievalism and public action and hence the potential for "militancy" which medievalism harbours, it sets out to offer a panorama of Western, mainly European, medievalism in recent decades.

This English translation by Andrew M. Hiltzik is the latest instalment in Brill's "National Cultivation of Culture" series. Edited by Joep Leerssen, the series covers (mainly but not exclusively) the many forms of cultural nationalism that emerged in the nineteenth century, for example in language politics, philology, folklore studies, historical fiction, and so forth. The English edition of Carpegna Falconieri's book follows earlier Spanish and French editions (both from 2015), which lightly updated the contents of the original. The context of this latest translation is, as Carpegna Falconieri acknowledges in a preface, one of "a new awareness of the fundamental importance of medievalism in the cultural and political life in the West." He sensibly refrains from updating the chronology even further for this edition but adds an epilogue that refers to more recent events. The book also includes some additional references to seminal research from the intervening years in the footnotes.

The "contemporary" in the title is conceived broadly: in a spirit of aetiology, the book frequently reaches back into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly the late 1960s – the time when, Carpegna Falconieri argues, the Middle Ages returned to prominence after a period of relative abeyance (10). The "politics" in the title, too, is conceived more broadly than in most comparable studies on "political medievalism." Carpegna Falconieri discusses not only such obvious instances of political medievalism as those that sprang up in the course of the so-called War on Terror (36) or the medievalism-fuelled irredentist movements of several "Celtic" countries (148-152) but also things like the rise of medievalist fantasy fiction in the sixties (71) and the "medieval" festivals that currently litter the European – and especially, as I have learned from this book, the Italian – landscape (78). While the political dimension is never entirely absent, of course, this wide net means the book also is a panorama of contemporary medievalism more broadly, with its greater chronological range ensuring it contributes some suggestive partial answers to the question of how and why the Middle Ages are made to matter to Western societies as much as they do in the twenty-first century.

There are twelve chapters plus a prologue, an introduction and an epilogue. The chapters are organised around a series of "macro-interpretations of the idea of the Middle Ages" (10). Not all of these are equally clear-cut, and some come with significant thematic overlap (nationalism being, unsurprisingly, a prominently shared theme). In the first two chapters, the

Middle Ages figure as the predominantly negative Other to modernity. This is mostly familiar ground, where discourses of the "Neo-Medieval West" raise the spectre of catastrophe and a post-national dissolution of world order (chapter 1), and Huntingtonesque clash-of-civilizations ideology engenders the notion of a Western civilization besieged by barbarians on the one hand and the Islamists' anti-Western propaganda against new crusaders on the other (chapter 2).

The subsequent chapters are devoted to appropriations of the Middle Ages that rely more strongly on a sense of cultural kinship. The third chapter is concerned with the fantastical strain in medievalism, recounting the emergence of medievalism as an "overarching cultural framework" in the nineteenth century and its lasting impact on both the emergent popular and children's literature (53) and nationalist ideology (59). This otherwise excellent chapter is somewhat complicated by the strict distinction Carpegna Falconieri makes between medievalism and medieval studies: "Medievalism is a cultural, social, and political phenomenon that responds to a different set of needs and is structured in a completely different manner from the academic study of the Middle Ages" (64). I believe this distinction is ultimately untenable – compare this, for instance, with Leslie Workman's famously broad definition of medievalism as "the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages" (Preface to *Medievalism in Europe II* 1). A rigid distinction runs the risk of concealing the academy's own ideological biases and implication in politics (both amply represented in history) and fails to account for the ease with which representations of the Middle Ages can transition, and often have transitioned, from medieval studies to (more obvious forms of) medievalism, as David Matthews reminded us some years ago ("Chaucer's American Accent" 760).

In the fourth chapter, Carpegna Falconieri sets up the chapters that follow by turning fully to the ways in which medievalism can be made to underpin collective – and political – identities. He offers a very useful chronology of political medievalism since the late 1960s, when the Middle Ages began to "color movements across the political spectrum, often youth movements, which […] attacked the system, from left and right, from anarchy and libertarianism" (73). The fifth chapter comments astutely on the current vogue for medievalist practices aimed at strengthening civic identity, most notably in the form of festivals and holidays. According to Carpegna Falconieri, this burgeoning comes on the back of a sense of social tradition lost stemming from the 1970s. It also comes with some marked ironies: strongly entangled in economic-touristic motives as they are, medievalist rebuttals of consumerist homogeneity themselves offer a homogenised Middle Ages that "is modular, repetitive, exportable, and precisely for this reason […] cherished by those who come to visit" (87).

Chapter six discusses the "Anarchist and Leftist Middle Ages" and is perhaps the most original, and fascinating, in the book. Noting the current preponderance of right-wing appropriations of the Middle Ages, Carpegna Falconieri shows how left-leaning intellectuals and artists turned to the Middle Ages for inspiration from the mid-1960s to the late 70s (89). Among the examples he cites are Italian greats such as Fabrizio De André, Dario Fo, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, the last of whom in particular viewed the turn to the deep past not as reactionary but revolutionary (99). Carpegna Falconieri is surely right to observe that "[t]oday this mode of representing the Middle Ages is hard to find" (102), but progressive medievalism is an area of research that has lately been picking up steam, bringing to light medievalisms that buck this trend – and this chapter will be a valuable resource for that kind of research. Carpegna Falconieri deals with the more familiar medievalism of right-wing "tradition" in the subsequent chapter, including such examples as that of the Norwegian

terrorist Anders Breivik and his indebtedness to SS medievalisms and Templarism (117ff.). However, Carpegna Falconieri rightly insists that a broader sense of tradition – really, "historicised" myths that stand outside of historical time (124) – equally underlies less extreme forms of right-wing thought. This is the oft-noted Middle Ages of reaction and nostalgia for a putative golden age that is meant to make up for a disappointing present.

The eighth and ninth chapters form a pair, discussing Nordic and Celtic themes respectively. Carpegna Falconieri offers an informative summary of the way the Nordic world has been involved in totalising theories of ethnogenesis and racist thought. He traces the ongoing "Nordic revival" to the 1980s (136) and points out the spectrum of thought now associated with it, from self-declared neo-Nazism to a largely apolitical neo-paganism (139). Celticism, he argues, contributes more strongly to the "contemporary political imaginary of the Middle Ages" (142), which it is able to do not least thanks to its bagginess as a concept: "In Celticism we find everything we need: tradition, mystery, mysticism, fairy tales, magic, the Grail" (145). This allows the Celtic Middle Ages to both provide much of the lexicon of medievalisms aimed at children (145f.) *and* inspire political agitation, as in the case of the Italian Lega del Nord's irredentism (152).

The tenth chapter addresses the "Catholic Middle Ages" and comments on such phenomena as the nationalist politics behind post-1989 canonisations of medieval saints in Eastern European countries (168f.). Carpegna Falconieri points out the unlikely links between Catholic traditionalism and US Protestant neo-conservatism (163): this "syncretism between generally unrelated political traditions" (164) is, again, due to ideas of a "clash of civilisations" (162) between the West and the rest. In the eleventh chapter, Carpegna Falconieri tackles head-on what I believe is one of the most important developments in medievalism since the 1990s: the resurgence of the Middle Ages of nations. I do not entirely agree with his view that such national medievalism is the near-exclusive province of Eastern European countries and that in Western Europe the Middle Ages "is now a metaphor for the non-state" (178) – the cases of the UK and Switzerland, with which I am familiar, clearly resist this trend. Nonetheless, the chapter gives a convincing account of the scale of this resurgence and a compelling critique of its symbiotic relationship with both ideas of supposed "ethno-cultural continuities" (184) and a separatist and isolationist politics. The final chapter deals with the reverse process to this nationalisation: medievalism produced to unite the people of Europe. Talk of the shared "roots of Europe" (194) is not currently matched, the author wryly notes, by a very lush forest. Nevertheless, the transnational figure of Charlemagne and the notion of a "Christian Europe" in particular have inspired pro-Union attempts at presenting Europe as united *historically*. Carpegna Falconieri concludes by countering the imagery of European roots with the more hopeful metaphor of European roads. He evokes a medieval past of "sharing, exchange, and openness," with "no need to invent elements of cohesion: when they [the roads] were there, they were there" (213f.).

As can probably be deduced from this outline alone, the book's scope is broad and its range nothing if not ambitious. It comes together in a coherent whole thanks to Carpegna Falconieri's impressive command of a wealth of primary material in several European languages. *The Militant Middle Ages* is a compelling piece of synthesis and original scholarship. It takes a welcome continental (southern) European perspective, which makes it a valuable complement and partial corrective to the international Anglophone conversation about medievalism studies. And while Carpegna Falconieri's epilogue makes it clear that he himself sees the uses of medievalism in separatist politics as having waned in the time since the original publication (221), I am not so sure. He mentions the example of Brexit, in the

context of which he saw hardly any enthusiastic use of medievalism (222) – an impression I do not quite share. Leading Brexiteers such as Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Nigel Farage, and particularly Eurosceptic ideologue-in-chief Daniel Hannan repeatedly invoked the English Middle Ages, variously highlighting constitutional heritage in a kind of Neo-Whiggism, denouncing a new Norman Yoke, and warning of post-Brexit economic "vassalage" to the EU. In any event, the book as a whole certainly maintains its relevance in light of the ongoing wealth of medievalisms that aim to make and remake collective identities. Credit is due to the author, then, for the way his work in this fast-moving field does not feel outdated nearly a decade after its original publication.

Finally, a note on presentation: Hiltzik's translation is for the most part perfectly serviceable, but I wonder if the book might not have benefited from greater assimilation to current stylistic practice in English-language medieval studies. As it is, the translation occasionally comes across as overly literal and stilted in ways the Italian original does not. The translation of the generic "uomini" as "men" is a particularly unfortunate decision, and the impersonal style and use of the academic "we" also translates badly into English, creating an impression of bombast where there is none in the Italian. There were some misses by the copy-editing department, too, especially in the form of typos (e.g. "Freidrich Engels," 58; "It does, however, Dean [sic!] […] that…," 119f.) and copy-paste errors (e.g. "to which we alluded to," 165; "this is the beautiful thing thing", 215). These are unforced formal errors, but they do not derogate from what is an informative, authoritative book about the modern Middle Ages of identity, which of course concerns virtually all scholars of medievalism in one way or other.

Matthias D. Berger
University of Bern